



GUIDELINES



Small Membership Church

Serve with Significance in Your Context



G U I D E L I N E S

Small- Membership Church

Serve with Significance in Your Context

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Discipleship Ministries

SMALL-MEMBERSHIP CHURCH

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Blessed to Be a Blessing

If you are reading this Guideline, you have said yes to servant leadership in your church. You are blessed to be a blessing. What does that mean?

By virtue of our baptism by water and the Spirit, God calls all Christians to faithful discipleship, to grow to maturity in faith (see Ephesians 4). The United Methodist Church expresses that call in our shared mission “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world” (*The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*, or the *Discipline*, ¶120). Each local congregation and community of faith lives out that call in response to its own context—the wonderful and unique combination of God-given human and material resources with the needs of the community, within and beyond the congregation.

The work of servant leaders—your work—is to open a way for God to work through you and the resources available to you in a particular ministry area, for you are about God’s work. As stewards of the mysteries of God (see 1 Corinthians 4:1), servant leaders are entrusted with the precious and vital task of managing and using God’s gifts in the ongoing work of transformation.

In The United Methodist Church, we envision transformation occurring through a cycle of discipleship (see the *Discipline*, ¶122). With God’s help and guidance, we

- reach out and receive people into the body of Christ,
- help people relate to Christ through their unique gifts and circumstances,
- nurture and strengthen people in their relationships with God and with others,
- send transformed people out into the world to lead transformed and transforming lives,
- continue to reach out, relate, nurture, and send disciples...

Every ministry area and group, from finance to missions, engages in all aspects of this cycle. This Guideline will help you see how that is true for the ministry area or group you now lead. When you begin to consider all of the work you do as ministry to fulfill God’s mission through your congregation, each task, report, and conversation becomes a step toward transforming the world into the kingdom of God.

Invite Christ into the process to guide your ministry. You are doing powerful and wonderful work. Allow missteps to become learning opportunities; rejoice in success. Fill your work with the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

God blesses you with gifts, skills, and experience. You are a blessing when you allow God to work through you to make disciples and transform the world. Thank you.

(Find additional help in the “Resources” section at the end of this Guideline, in *The Book of Discipline*, and through <http://www.umc.org>.)

Vital Small Churches

A church's existence is not justified merely because of its age or historic location. A church exists solely for God's mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Churches of any size are called to have a clear vision and a strong sense of purpose that guides everything the church does. This does not require a lot of people. Vitality happens when even a few people possess a powerful sense of God's presence and call upon their lives!

The majority of churches (about 70 percent) in our denomination are small, defined as no more than 200 members. The temptation of a small church is to dwell in a scarcity mind-set: "What can we few do?" The healthier, more productive and faithful question (for any church) is, "What can God do through our congregation in this place and time?" This positive, abundance mind-set is the attitude of a vital congregation. The size of the membership will determine *how*, but not *whether* the church goes about its mission and ministry.

What are some of the indicators of a vital congregation? A vital congregation

- is a Christ-centered, transformational, relational community, where each person's name and gifts are known and laity are equipped and engaged in leadership;
- nurtures faith in each person by sharing the Bible, each person's story, and service, both individually and through an intentional system of small groups;
- preserves a sense of continuity and presence, despite obstacles or changes, with strong pastoral and lay leadership;
- responds to human need in a caring, gracious way with dignity and respect, supported by worship that empowers and enlarges the Christian life.

Writer and editor Brandon O'Brien, in "Five Strategic Advantages of Small Churches," notes five strengths that smaller churches, particularly, can use with great effectiveness.

- **Authenticity.** "First, be yourself. . . . Second, make sure your behavior lines up with your stated convictions."
- **Lean and Focused.** Instead of running many generic programs, the small church should zero in on one or two programs that focus on the unique needs of the local context.
- **People-powered.** If a small church limits the number of programs it runs, then the bulk of the church's ministry has to come from its members. Empowering and releasing members to minister in the community requires that you know your congregants well enough to know what they are passionate about, gifted for, and already involved in.

- **Intergenerational Relationships.** Students who seek a church home after high school are those who have had meaningful relationships with other adults in the church besides their parents or have been given opportunities to serve younger children in the church, and so are more likely to view the church as important to their lives.
- **Ministry on the Margins.** The largest churches attract a fairly well-defined demographic. The average age of a mega-church attendee is forty. Nearly a third of them are single and, on the whole, the mega-church crowd is more educated and wealthier than the average members of smaller churches. But smaller, nimbler churches can reach the people who fall outside this demographic.

(Adapted from <http://www.sermoncentral.com/pastors-preaching-articles/brandon-obrien-five-strategic-advantages-of-small-churches-740.asp>.)

Small but vital churches embody Christ's activity in the world. The trap is in thinking, "We have to get bigger to get better." Freeing, energizing action comes in realizing, "We have to get better to get bigger," though *bigger* is not a worthy goal in itself. The goal is to focus on what God would have you do. Being faithful to and focused on the mission is what draws others in.

Think about the attitude that church members have about themselves as the church. Do they focus on assets, gifts, and relationship with God to be out in ministry, or do they seek to hold on to whatever is left from days gone by?

Biblical Witness

God has a special love and purpose for things that are small. Just as God once lifted up the tiny nation of Israel to be a witness, God still calls the small church to do the same. Jesus taught that the meek and lowly were especially blessed (Luke 6:20-23), that the widow's mite was a valued offering (21:1-4), and that seeking the one lost sheep truly mattered (15:1-7). These passages focus on *nurture* of the people of Christ.

The writer of Deuteronomy reminded Israel that God chose and loved them not because they were numerous but because they were "the fewest of all peoples" (7:7a), yet Isaiah taught that they were to be a light to the nations (Isaiah 49:5-6). Jesus taught that the tiny mustard seed had great potential (Luke 13:18-19). These Scripture passages illustrate God's call to ministries of *outreach* and *witness*.

The apostle Paul, writing to the community in Corinth, celebrated that "A demonstration of the Spirit is given to each person for the common good. . . . In the church, God has appointed first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then miracles, then gifts of healing, the ability to help others, leadership skills, different kinds of tongues" (1 Corinthians 12: 7, 28). In the small house churches, or even a cluster of them in a wider community, Paul affirmed that in the divine economy, the people of faith are gifted with the resources they need to be in ministry and mission.

Flowing from this, we can see four basic assumptions that guide all healthy small churches.

- The congregation has a strong sense of God's mission in the world. This purpose drives the vision, stewardship, and commitment of the congregation.

- The ministry of the baptized—lay and clergy—is claimed and celebrated, and it fosters a strong sense of identity. All are included and respected, regardless of differences among them.
- There is a strong connection between church and community. The church knows the community, has clarity about its capacity to serve, and seeks effective ways to do so.
- Discipleship is primary, not a pastime. Making disciples and growing in discipleship are the priorities that guide every decision.

Model Discipleship

Key to modeling discipleship is how you carry out your mission as leaders in the church. Modeling discipleship requires you to be a disciple yourself—a grace-filled follower of Jesus Christ who puts faith into action, joyfully joining in God’s mission to the world. Through participation in the mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, you not only engage in your area of ministry but also work to empower others to be in ministry. The vitality of your congregation and the church as a whole depends upon the faith, abilities, and actions of all who work together for the glory of God.

One of the most significant ways we develop new leaders is through the core process for carrying out our mission as stated in ¶122 of *The Book of Discipline*:

We make disciples as we:

- proclaim the gospel, seek, welcome and gather into the body of Christ;
- lead persons to commit their lives to God through baptism by water and the spirit and profession of faith in Jesus Christ;
- nurture persons in Christian living through worship, the sacraments, spiritual disciplines, and other means of grace, such as Wesley’s Christian conferencing;
- send persons into the world to live lovingly and justly as servants of Christ by healing the sick, feeding the hungry, caring for the stranger, freeing the oppressed, being and becoming a compassionate, caring presence, and working to develop social structures that are consistent with the gospel; and
- continue the mission of seeking, welcoming and gathering persons into the community of the body of Christ.

To better remember and understand the core process as written in ¶122, think in terms of **H.O.P.E.**—**H**ospitality, **O**ffer Christ, **P**urpose, and **E**ngagement. Through these discipleship paths of H.O.P.E., new disciples are made and sent out to reach even more people to bring into the body of Christ.

We go into the world in outreach and mission, offering hope through proclamation of the gospel, seeking, welcoming, and gathering as we offer **hospitality** to those not yet in the body. We **offer Christ** by providing an opportunity for people to commit their lives

to God through baptism by water and Spirit and profession of faith. We nurture people in Christian living to help them find a true sense of **purpose** in life, learning what it means to live out their belief through acts of piety and acts of mercy, Christian conferencing, regular participation in the sacrament of Holy Communion, and other means of grace. Through **engagement**, we send out these grace-filled followers of Jesus Christ who are putting their faith into action, helping to transform the surrounding community and offering hospitality in the name of Jesus Christ. Thus **H.O.P.E.** cycles back around.

Ask yourselves and the leadership of your congregation how your church might become a place of hope. Whether your church is small, medium, or large, it is essential to have an intentional discipleship system like H.O.P.E. in place. No matter which discipleship system you decide to use, the components of this core process should be established in every local church as we make disciples and develop leaders to accomplish the church's mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. After all, it's all about hope.

Remember, your visibility as a leader in the congregation places you in a position to model good habits of personal devotion and discipleship. As you engage in spiritual practices and serve in outreach and mission, you serve as an example and mentor to others.

Organize for Ministry: NOW(rm)

Local churches have the freedom, within the bounds of *The Book of Discipline*, to organize their ministry in ways that take into account the capacity of the membership and the context in which their ministry happens. This blessing allows for creativity (we don't all have to look alike) and imposes a bit of structure through mandated categories of ministry. These mandated ministries are nurture, outreach, witness, and resources for ministry (administration), or NOW(rm). The acronym just introduced, H.O.P.E., describes the same process and lens for organizing and analyzing ministry. This Guideline will explore the NOW(rm) categories, with the understanding that the lines between them are not tidy.

The Book of Discipline defines the work of nurture, outreach, and witness ministries for churches of all sizes:

The nurturing ministries of the congregation shall give attention to but not be limited to education, worship, Christian formation, membership care, small groups, and stewardship. Attention must be given to the needs of individuals and families of all ages.

The outreach ministries . . . shall give attention to local and larger community ministries of compassion, justice, and advocacy. These ministries include church and society, global ministries, higher education and campus ministry, health and welfare, Christian unity and interreligious concerns, religion and race, and the status and role of women.

The witness ministries . . . shall give attention to developing and strengthening evangelistic efforts of sharing of personal and congregational stories of Christian experience, faith, and service; communications; Lay Servant Ministries; and other means that give expressions of witness for Jesus Christ" (§252.2.a–c).

The task for your church is to survey the congregation and wider community to discern needs as well as the capacity of the congregation to respond to those needs. There are three important keys to designing successful ministries using NOW(rm):

1. Leadership Commitment. People who make the ministry decisions in the church must share a common understanding of what it means to be in ministry, and they must commit themselves to working together for success. They must be trained and encouraged. NOW(rm) is not about doing things right but about doing the right things. A vital congregation must do more than simply nurture the people who come into the building; it must reach beyond to live out discipleship in the community. Leaders must work together to set in place a discipleship system of nurture, outreach, witness, and resource ministries. When leaders know, respect, and trust one another, they may more easily understand and name what the church expects of them and what they offer the church.

2. Assessment of Current Ministry and Needs. Honestly review the needs and activities of people or groups in the church and community who are being served and those who are not. Successful leaders discern where the place of greatest potential is for ministry by using demographic studies, interviews, and informal conversations and by “pounding the pavement.” Most annual conferences have a subscription to “MissionInsite,” an excellent demographic tool you can use to begin to know the composition of your neighborhood and community and to form appropriate questions to learn more. By knowing the community, you are in a position to respond to decisive moments that may open or deepen a spiritual experience for someone. Does the church do an equal job of taking care of those outside the church and those within? Are nurture ministries balanced carefully with outreach and witness? Is the church focused more on mission, maintenance, or survival?

3. Creativity: Risk and Try Something New. Sometimes the patterns of ministry can become our prison. The more successful past ministries are in our minds and hearts, the more powerful they can be in controlling the present and, ultimately, the future. We do the same activities in the same way year after year (and wonder why we are not getting the same response we once did). A new day often demands a new faithful response. We must honor traditions and still address people’s emerging needs and expectations at the same time. Do new ideas thrive or die in your church? Remind your church that it needs to be willing to take some risks. Some of your efforts will produce growth; others won’t. Do not waste time dwelling on failure; learn from it instead.

Nurture Ministries (N)

People need a growing relationship with Jesus Christ and the Christian community. *Nurture* expresses the need for Christians to be cultivated in the Christian faith, to acquire and apply the spiritual resources necessary to provide effective outreach and witness ministries.

Nurture brings to mind activities like Sunday school, visitation of sick and homebound members, and the worship ministry of the congregation. However, it is helpful to remember that the church's nurturing ministries are much broader.

The Christian formation ministry of the church incorporates Sunday school as well as Bible studies, prayer groups, confirmation, orientation and membership classes, and other short- or long-term classes or small groups. Short-term classes can address a variety of needs in the congregation, from instruction on Christian parenting, to care of the elderly, and even congregational conflict management. The educational ministry of the church also includes leadership training for church officers, Sunday school leaders, teachers, and other small-group leaders.

Perhaps the most urgently needed type of nurturing ministry today is simply assisting members of the congregation in their daily walk of faith. People who seek to grow in faith are constantly assailed by a variety of activities that compete for their time and energy. Growing disciples need help in developing habits that include the daily practice of the means of grace (study of Scripture, prayer, fasting and abstinence, and so on).

Although overlooked in many churches, having fun together (fellowship) is another way to provide joyous emotional support to all members of the congregation. Plan events that meet the needs of families, older people, single people, children, youth, and include those who feel discriminated against or marginalized by society. Sometimes this can be accomplished through intergenerational activities. At other times, a group with similar interests may find mutual support by spending time with one another.

One key driver of vitality in congregations is the intentional use of small groups and programs for people of all ages represented in your church and local community. Within those groups and programs, you have both the training ground and nurturing opportunity to grow disciples, who then mature in faith and become leaders of discipleship.

The Sunday worship service is an important vehicle for nurturing the congregation. Take care to plan worship with wide appeal. In general, the more the members of the congregation help to plan and participate in the worship services, the more meaningful these services are for them. Worship should be inspirational, spiritually stimulating, and challenging. Lively, God-centered worship is a crucial component of vital congregations. Congregations may debate the appeal and value of traditional versus contemporary worship, but every form of worship must take into account the context in which it is offered.

Examples of Nurture Ministries

Education

- Short-term Christian education classes for adults
- *DISCIPLE Bible Study* (within a church or offered cooperatively)
- Spiritual gifts discovery classes
- Covenant Discipleship groups
- Spiritual formation retreats and academies
- Lay Servant courses
- Vacation Bible school for children, youth, and adults
- Lenten, Advent, or other seasonal studies and devotions
- Confirmation and membership classes
- Fellowship
- Hospitality training for worship greeters and key leaders
- United Methodist Men, Women, Youth
- Midweek evening program for children, families, or intergenerational groups
- Afterschool or Saturday-care programs for children (like Kid's Club)
- Church camp (consider offering scholarships)

Physical and Emotional Support

- Presence during trying times (providing meals, doing chores, offering company)
- Wheelchairs and other accessibility equipment and building features
- Leadership training and prayer support
- Cards and devotional material, such as *The Upper Room*, sent to homebound members
- Pastoral, caring, and listening lay ministries, such as Lay Servant Ministries and Stephen Ministry

Worship

- Worship planning and participation (involve various people in a variety of ways)
- Lectionary study for people who want to help plan and participate as worship leaders
- Choir or special music for worship services (spirited singing involving a new instrument, such as guitar, synthesizer, or drums)
- Dramas and short skits
- Special Sundays (social, such as Mother's Day; denominational celebrations, such as Native American Awareness Sunday and United Methodist Student Day)
- Laity Sunday
- Ecumenical worship celebrations, such as Church Women United or World Day of Prayer
- Fifth Sunday Charge Worship and Fellowship Dinner

Outreach Ministries (O)

All churches are called to provide outreach ministries on the local, state, regional, national, and international levels. Participating in outreach is a good way to get people involved.

To provide appropriate outreach ministries, first get to know your community and its needs. Gather demographic information and then interview people in your community who are aware of need: a public school nurse, police chief, senior citizens center director, fire department chief, county or regional social services director, county or regional health director, community organizing project director, and others who serve the community. Ask these and other questions:

- Who are the people with needs in this community?
- What do they need?
- Are there different kinds of needs?
- How can the congregation respond to these needs?

Be bold. Because of God's abundant grace, there is never anything inherently small about any church! This proclamation tells us that while some tasks may seem enormous, the infinite availability of God's grace makes it possible for a church of any size to address these tasks. The small-membership church may not be able to do everything, but it can do something! Outreach ministries may take several forms:

- Ministries of compassion involve a congregation in addressing the immediate needs of individuals, families, and communities. The congregation may respond to local disasters, provide food, clothing, emergency housing, counseling, employment, and so forth in the community.
- Community ministries of concern and advocacy call for a congregation's involvement in the enrichment of community life and advocacy for justice—changes in local communities related to welfare, long-term housing, education, community economic development, health services, marginalized groups, and so on.
- Regional, national, and global outreach ministries call on a congregation to engage the structures and values of society and to move toward justice and righteousness in public policies, such as basic human rights, land use and control, ecology, immigration, and the world's economic systems.

Outreach Ministries through Giving

Many small-membership churches are doing much-needed and exciting outreach ministries of compassion in their neighborhoods and communities. United Methodist

apportionments help fund outreach ministries in these local areas and annual conference settings as well as across the United States and in numerous countries around the world. Special “Advance” giving supports approved ministries around the world that are not covered through denominational giving.

Clergy and lay leadership need to find creative ways to inform the congregation about how apportionments and other missional gifts are used. One way to do this is to offer a “Church in Action” report during worship (monthly or weekly), summarizing our denominational outreach work. It is also important to provide opportunities to celebrate this missional giving and its results.

Outreach ministry involves more than simply giving dollars. Church members should be encouraged to experience a hands-on project by participating in a current service ministry or by initiating a new ministry of service that meets a community need. The resulting sense of satisfaction and accomplishment often far outweighs that of placing a donation in the offering plate. Hands-on outreach ministries also provide opportunities for church members to reconnect experientially with their local community, nation, and world.

Effective small-membership churches both support and participate in outreach ministries. They embrace John Wesley’s belief that the world is our parish, that, as faithful disciples, we are called to reach out to local, state, regional, national, and international communities. Sometimes members of the congregation resist supporting international outreach, stating that they prefer “to take care of their own people first,” but God’s creation knows no such artificial boundaries, especially as our world grows ever closer to becoming a global village.

Examples of Outreach Ministries

Ministries of Compassion

- Give childcare scholarships for young mothers in the community to help them complete high school
- Provide free funeral dinners for nonmembers (and members!)
- Support terminally ill people and their families as hospice volunteers
- Deliver meals-on-wheels
- Provide emergency financial aid for utilities, food, clothing, shelter, medicine, or serve as an emergency medical technician or volunteer firefighter
- Do errands or provide transportation for older people as needed

Community Concern and Advocacy

- Donate seeds, fertilizers, and canning equipment to low-income households and teach people how to garden, can, and freeze foods
- Donate to Heifer Project International
- Sponsor work camps designed to improve substandard housing, construct camp buildings, or support Habitat for Humanity
- Host work trips to mission sites

- Financially support and volunteer to help with local domestic violence assistance programs or tutor vulnerable children

Regional, National, and Global Outreach

- Collect special offerings, such as One Great Hour of Sharing and other Special Sunday offerings
- Observe Native American Awareness Sunday or Rural Life Sunday
- Recycle and contribute the proceeds to an outreach project
- Sponsor a refugee family (perhaps in cooperation with two or three other churches)
- Organize voter registration or run for political office
- Participate in United Methodist Volunteers in Mission or as an individual volunteer
- Participate in district or annual conference leadership
- Participate in Children's Fund for Christian Mission

Organize and Assess Your Outreach Ministries

Form a team of people who will work on developing outreach ministries.

Begin by asking what outreach ministries are already being supported financially and how your church members already engage in outreach. Then inventory the current outreach ministries according to type (local, state, national, international) and means of support (financial, hands-on, advocacy).

When you have a portrait of current practice, look for what could be next:

- What other needs exist in your community?
- What talents, abilities, and experiences of church members could be used to address these needs?
- What are the needs of your state, nation, and world? How might your congregation address these needs? What biblical teaching supports this work?

It is important to develop a balance of ministries aimed at local, state, national, and international concerns. Also work to develop a balance between outreach ministries that your church supports financially and those in which church members actively participate.

Witness Ministries (W)

Through the ministry of witness, people share their understanding and experience of personal and corporate salvation, reconciliation, worship, celebration, spiritual development, and discipline. Witness also provides people with opportunities to work for justice, righteousness, and the redemption of the world.

Most people who become members of churches with small membership are attracted to the congregation for one or more of the following reasons.

- They are born into the congregation.
- They are attracted to the ministry of the members or the pastor, often because of ministry to them during a personal crisis.
- They find a warm, intimate, family-type fellowship there.
- They are able to fill a need in the church's ministry.
- They are recruited through participation in a fellowship or service group related to the church, such as the choir, scouts, and so forth.

Expand Your View of Witness Ministries

The Great Commission of Jesus Christ is plain and simple: Christians are to tell others about the gospel and encourage them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ (Matthew 28:18-20). There are four building blocks for witness ministries in any church, including the small church:

1. concern for people in the community who have no church home and the willingness to befriend those people with Christian love;
2. commitment to talk to and listen to God about concern for these people who may not know God;
3. willingness to develop effective and appropriate skills for sharing faith with those who have no faith or who may have lost it along the way, and to hear their stories as well;
4. pastoral and lay leadership willing to teach members of the church how to practice witnessing effectively and faithfully.

People do not make a commitment to Jesus Christ by chance. They do not learn by accident what faith demands regarding their relationship with God, humanity, other living things, and the land with all its rich resources. Witness ministries must be thoughtfully planned and implemented.

Witness with Visitors

Examine how people who visit your church find a sense of belonging and become accepted members of your congregation. Most churches with small membership like to

think of themselves as “friendly, happy families.” However, friendliness does not guarantee that new members will easily become part of your church family. As with most families, your church family has a shared history, language, and behavior. Would you still feel the welcome and support of the congregation if you were a visitor today?

Newcomers must be offered ways to learn (and longtime members need to be reminded of) this family background in order to be truly integrated into the congregation and feel that they belong. They must also be offered a meaningful role in their new church family that includes sharing a faith and ministry focus they believe they may be called toward. There are several ways to accomplish this.

- Tell the congregation’s story on United Methodist Heritage Sunday or at “Homecoming.”
- Assign new members and friends a mentor from the congregation. The role of the mentor is to make the newcomers feel welcome, facilitate their adoption into the congregation, and help them discover opportunities for study, fellowship, and service in the church that will deepen their faith.
- Include newcomers in opportunities for fun and play. Congregations need to play together to enjoy one another’s company and to learn more about one another.

Witness in the Community

There is a close parallel between witness and outreach ministries, especially those that address the structures and values of society and move toward justice and righteousness. Witness ministry, on its own, may happen (if it does happen) with little focus or intentionality. Be mindful about sharing the good news as you engage with people in the community.

Accurate awareness of people in your community and the potential for new members in your church is absolutely essential in planning for effective witness ministries. Before you begin reviewing or developing ministries of witness, however, gather information about the wider community (make specific assignments from the list below). Your research should include:

- Recent United States Census Bureau population statistics for your community. Call your district or conference office for any demographics they may have of your community. You may be able to obtain demographic information from “MissionInsite” (which uses the latest census data) through your conference office. Your local school superintendent and public library may also be sources of data.
- The breakdown of the total population into age groups: preschool, younger and older elementary, younger and older teens, young adults, middle adults, and older adults.
- Total number of churches and other houses of worship in your community, their membership, and average worship attendance.
- The number and the percentage of people in your community without a church home. This can be derived from demographic information.
- The racial and ethnic diversity of your community.
- Annual number of newcomers to the community.

- Identify and describe five groups in your community who, for whatever reason, are going through challenges or are difficult to love.
- Who are the impoverished, hardworking, people in your community?
- Who in your community cannot worship on Sunday morning because of work schedules or a disability?

Examples of Witness Ministries

Speaking and Word Witness

- Church members share with their friends, relatives, coworkers, fellow students, church visitors, and others about the meaning of the Christian faith in their lives; this also includes hearing the stories of others without judgment or pressure
- Canvass door-to-door in the community, include an invitation to worship (use brochures or informative door hangers)
- Provide worship services at nursing homes or in a park before ballgames or other activities that attract people
- Sponsor a lay servant course in your church
- Offer an event open to the community, such as a concert with contemporary Christian music or outdoor tent revival services

Doing and Action Witness

- Make the church sanctuary available to the community for funerals, memorial services, and weddings (with clear policies approved by the trustees)
- Offer ecumenical worship services in cooperation with other area churches
- Support peaceful demonstrations in the community to raise awareness of social challenges and press for actions to resolve those problems
- Provide a church-sponsored scholarship program for graduating seniors
- Recycle
- Mobilize community resistance to hard liquor sales, drug sales and use, gambling, or other activities destructive to the community
- Host an art exhibit to display work that answers a question such as “Where do I find God?”

Good Communication Enhances Witness

Effective smaller congregations use good public relations techniques. Some churches may feel uneasy about public relations as a way to witness to their faith. However, it is an indispensable part of witnessing to the local community. There are three important keys to doing effective public relations: advertise, advertise, and advertise.

Place temporary signs in front of the church. These signs should be attractively designed and used to promote such activities as vacation Bible school, special seasonal programs, rally days, and so forth.

Make some recognizable change to the outside of your church building and property annually. This reminds the community that your church is active and present within the community and gives it a fresh look. The change need not be substantial. Something as simple as putting an attractive canvas banner across the front of the building or planting different colored annual flowers is enough to attract the attention of those who pass by.

Make good use of your church website, local newspaper, radio, or cable company. Think beyond simply listing your worship services. Placing articles describing the ministries of your congregation and upcoming events can be highly effective.

When decorating the church for celebrations, do not forget the outside of the building. Wreaths and lights are helpful during Advent and Christmas. A simple wooden cross draped with purple fabric during Lent and changed to white during Eastertide is especially attractive.

Intentionality Is the Key

You may find you need more preparation for doing witness ministries than for nurture and outreach ministries. The pastor and leadership may need to participate in a witness ministry training event or series of workshops. While this type of training should be made available to anyone who wishes to participate, it may be helpful for the pastor, lay leader, or witness committee chairperson to select a few key people to be trained, who can then provide leadership.

Growth Potential

If your research reveals that there is potential for numerical growth in your community, you may want to consider forming a “church growth team.” The church growth team’s primary responsibility is to devise, resource, and monitor church growth ministries in the congregation.

Members of the team should be seen as coordinators and co-participants in this ministry, not as the only ones responsible for this work. Together, examine these issues.

- Based on the local data you have collected, is it possible that effective witness ministries might result in numerical growth for your congregation? Why or why not?
- How do people become a part of your congregation? Do they reflect the biblical situations described in this resource?
- Do people who have become part of your church in recent years reflect ways that people become members of small churches as described in this resource? If not, how did they become members?
- How does your church understand witness ministries? Where do you need continuing education in witness ministries?
- Do you personally know or know of people without a church home? Is your congregation equipped to do effective witness ministries?
- What witness ministries are currently taking place at your church?
- What witness ministries would you like your congregation to add to those already in place?

Resource Ministries (rm)

The work of organizing and administering the church's ministries always requires careful planning, implementation, and evaluation. This work is absolutely essential and it is never an end in itself; it is a means of grace for those who participate and those who benefit from the work of administration as the church runs smoothly and efficiently. Each group has different tasks, but all provide support for the ministry and mission of the church.

Consult the *Discipline* (§258) for further descriptions of the committee on finance, board of trustees, staff/pastor-parish relations committee, and church treasurer. The *Guidelines* for each of these ministry areas offers leadership helps. A brief description of each of these critical tasks follows here.

Trustees

The trustees manage the building and site as a resource for ministry (see the *Discipline*, §§258.3; 2525–2552). They ensure that everything is in proper working order. Among their responsibilities, they will

- review the site as a place for ministry and make sure that everything is easily located and accessible;
- maintain facility appearance, cleanliness, safety, and function;
- manage risk reduction and guarantee safety both in the facility and during church activities, including Safe Sanctuaries® practices;
- develop policies for the use of the building, property, facilities, and equipment for members and community;
- develop signage for rooms, directions, and so on so that people know where to go for worship, nursery, classes, and other activities

Finance

Developing a budget can both interpret and support ministry. Using the NOW(rm) model as a guide for developing the church's general budget is another way to interpret the model—and the focus on ministry—to the congregation. A church budget set up according to these priorities is not only an informative interpretation tool but is also a theological document that clearly delineates the Christian ministries of the congregation.

The responsibilities of the finance committee can be found in the *Discipline* (§258.4). The finance committee creates and administers the church's budget, which may also include taking responsibility for raising money through stewardship efforts.

A key to supporting ministry financially is intentionally setting guidelines for fundraising. It is crucial to keep in view that money is not what drives the budget and fundraising. Rather, look to the ministries to which God has called the church, and work to establish the practical means to carry out those ministries. The *why* of fundraising is the heart of the matter; it separates the church from a small business and demonstrates our stewardship.

Staff/Pastor-Parish Relations

The staff/pastor-parish relations committee is defined in the *Discipline* (§258.2). The main focus of this group is to help the pastor and other staff use their gifts and abilities most effectively and to promote unity in the church. Staff/pastor-parish relations committees that want to do effective work will learn about

- the nature of chaos and change;
- resolving and transforming conflict;
- the value of covenants to guide behavior;
- developing clear, open communication;
- promoting ministry support from district strategies (especially inside the church), conferences, and general church agencies.

Nominations and Leadership Development

The work of this committee is described in the *Discipline* (§258.1). Think of this group in your church as the gardeners, whose task is to nourish the roots of the plants. This team identifies the gifts of individuals and provides training and support for ministry leadership. An engaged committee on nominations and leadership development will offer opportunities for spiritual growth that include spiritual gifts discovery.

Pastoral Leadership

In smaller churches where the pastoral leader is the only paid leader, he or she does well to engage an active laity through coaching, mentoring, and practicing the spiritual disciplines that help them grow in grace and faith. The pastor is also a change agent who has a vision for growth in the congregation and who can lead planning and goal setting to achieve the greatest potential of the congregation as a household of faith.

In God's economy, the gifts needed to flourish are already present in the congregation. Your task is to discern where those gifts lie and then, as a church leadership team, find ways to support and complement one another. As each leader, including the pastor, is empowered to live out of his or her strengths, the governance of congregational life and mission will itself be strengthened.

Planning and Evaluation

Working as leadership to carry out ministry will depend on the kind of parish or charge you have. There are numerous ways in which congregations may be yoked or clustered. In addition, the pastoral leader could be lay or clergy who may or may not have sacramental privileges. He or she may be part-time and serve only one church. For administrative convenience, you may have church officers who execute their ministry across a multiple charge, rather than duplicating that task in two or more churches. You might have a blend of local church and charge leaders, depending on the size, location, need, and desire of the participating congregations.

When one pastoral leader (or team) conducts ministry and pastoral care across two or more churches, it is crucial to coordinate ministries among those congregations. It is equally essential that laity take up the mantle and responsibility for leading their respective congregations. One pastor stretches only so far, and the various ministries (or churches) should cooperate, rather than compete with one another.

Mission and Vision

Individual churches or churches on a charge may have distinctly different “personalities,” but the mission will still be the same: to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Interpretation of that mission will be formed by each church or charge to reflect a vision of what a faithful disciple looks like in your context. The means of disciple making (what you do as a church) will be determined by the context of ministry, the gifts and capacities of the church members, and the available resources.

Whatever ministries the church or charge conducts will be evaluated in light of their value in disciple making. The church may do wonderful things, but if those activities do not advance the cause of making disciples, using an intentional discipleship system such as H.O.P.E.—Hospitality, Offer Christ, Purpose, Engagement, perhaps they are better left to someone else. In a small-membership church, ministry should be carefully focused to enrich, rather than exhaust, its finite number of leaders and members.

The members of a multiple charge will have different gifts and interests, so you may want to consider planning across the charge, rather than church by church. Don’t duplicate ministries that will, or can be, more robust by cooperating.

As you plan for the activities and experiences that lead people into a life of discipleship, you will organize around a flow or process. For example, consider the mission and vision of Little UMC, which is in an economically depressed area: “The mission of Little UMC is to form, nurture, and equip disciples of Jesus Christ. Our vision is disciples who are grounded in Scripture, engaged in radical hospitality, encouraging hope, and steeped in love for all in

need.” *Mission* defines your purpose: why you do what you do; *vision* is the big picture of what it looks like when you have succeeded.

Goals and Strategies

With a clear idea of your mission and vision, you then begin to plan the goals and strategies, which are specific steps that cumulatively lead to fulfilling the mission. At Little UMC, four goals are implied in the vision. People who are

- grounded in Scripture,
- engaged in significant hospitality,
- hopeful and who encourage hope,
- steeped in love for those in need.

Some strategies by which you might implement those goals include:

- basic and in-depth Bible study;
- fellowship and intentional growth groups;
- support networks, particularly those that open up preparation for employment or retooling job skills;
- training and orientation for all members to “be the church” for any and all who attend, as well as embodying the church in the community;
- cooperative ministry that meets the practical needs of the community, such as childcare, food pantry, or free medical clinic.

Success breeds further success, so it is important to have short-term, easily reachable goals. Early victories are motivating and encouraging; they keep you moving forward while you undertake longer-term, more ambitious goals.

Set Priorities

In developing short- and longer-term goals and strategies, you will need to decide what gets first attention. All of those ideas should be filtered through the mission and vision. If they uphold and advance your church’s plan, keep them. If not, move to something else.

Capacity affects your goals and priorities. How many people, how much energy, what amount of time, which skills, how much space, what sort of equipment, how much money do you have to do what you want? Guard against “scarcity thinking” and focus on what you have. With careful “abundance” scrutiny, you may be amazed at the extent of assets you didn’t realize you have.

Develop and Use a Calendar

A planning calendar, whether it is maintained by the pastor, lay leader, or church council, is essential in smaller congregations. Ministry groups and other committees should check this calendar before scheduling church programs and events.

The calendar keeps track of specific events—what will happen on what days in what space—but it is also a necessary tool to help keep tasks on track for long-range plans.

Plan with the end in mind (your vision) for whatever you do. Ask, “What does God want to accomplish through this ministry?” To further assess your plans, ask, “Who is being served? What will be done? Why it is important? How it will be done? When and where will it happen? By whom? How will we know we have been successful?”

Examine Policies and Processes

No matter what size your church is, there are certain ways things get done (processes); and there are particular, though often unspoken, policies behind the decisions that are made (why we do what we do). Once those processes and policies are clear and spoken, they can be examined to ensure that they keep the church and its members safe (personally and legally) and focused on fulfilling the mission of the church effectively. Regular examination will help to keep operations fresh and outside the “we’ve always done it that way” rut.

Evaluation

Evaluate and celebrate ministry. Take stock regularly of the what, why, and how of what you’re doing. Then take it a step further to evaluate the impact on the spiritual and material lives of the participants. To do this effectively, you will need to establish measures.

Measures (or metrics) are indicators of activity and impact, and they are implied by the mission and vision statements and your established goals and strategies. Looking again at Little UMC, you see a flow of activity that leads to the vision, which we will abbreviate here in key words:

- **Form** in faith (grounded in Scripture)
- **Relate** (engaged in significant hospitality/are hopeful and encourage hope)
- **Serve** (steeped in love for those in need)

It is important to define your terms carefully so that there is enough specificity to measure objectively. Measures should be both *quantitative* (how many, how much) and *qualitative* (what sort of change, what difference did it make). *Quantitative* measures are easy because they can be counted: We had 50 people in worship; our Sunday school grew by 4 percent in a year; our pledges increased by 2 percent. But quantitative measures only go so far. They don’t get at what is actually going on inside the disciple we are trying to make and nurture and the transformation God wills for the world.

Qualitative measures, or impact awareness, are personal; sometimes intangible, they can be described and observed. Consider a few of these possible measures of spiritual growth:

- regularly participates in worship;
- regularly participates in Christian formation group(s);
- tells personal stories that attest to spiritual growth and change;
- moves from “member” to “leader”;
- personal involvement is Christ-centered and other-directed;
- invites and/or mentors others;
- invests in the ministry and nurture of children and youth;
- is habituated in the means of grace or has added regular spiritual practice;
- seeks continuing education and formation activities.

If this suggestion of establishing measures sounds too “big church” or ambitious for a small-membership church, consider the ways that intentionally developed strategies and quantitative/qualitative measures to evaluate them will strengthen your ministry:

- Having a plan gives focus and direction. It helps to reveal gaps and needs in an over-all ministry plan.
- When leaders know what is expected and how it will be evaluated, they are more confident. Defined expectations helps eliminate subjectivity or arbitrariness in the evaluation.
- If problems arise or leaders need more help or training, there is a way to talk about it and deal with it.
- A plan with specific strategies and measures will have been discussed and approved in the church council. When the leaders and other volunteers executing the plan do as well as they can on what everyone agreed upon, and the plan doesn't work so well, you can examine the strategies rather than criticizing the volunteers. Leaders trust they will be supported, and not blamed, when a flawed strategy “fails.”

For more help on planning and evaluation, go to: www.umvitalcongregations.com. See especially “Measures Evaluation Tool” in the “Setting Goals” tab.

When It's Not Working

Rarely does everything go according to even the best-laid plans. Sometimes gifts and strengths don't match up; people come and go; personalities clash; the vision becomes obscure for a bit; emergencies drain energy and resources; there was a fatal, but unseen flaw in a major strategy. Any number of things can subvert your goals. If the issue is the strategy, ditch it and find a different one, with no recriminations. Try to learn from what worked and what didn't (failure is an excellent teacher). Work to replicate and improve successful strategies and revise flawed processes and plans.

If the issue is personnel, the person in question may realize that he or she is not quite up to the task or poorly matched in gifts and abilities. Other people may not realize the need for a change in their leadership or actively resist it. Their vision for ministry may be obscured behind the need for power, attention, or relationship. Regardless of the size of the membership, having an ineffective leader who refuses to step aside or who is never challenged to change is ultimately worse than no leader at all.

All leadership issues must be handled with grace and compassion, as well as courage. When a change must be made, work to honor the contribution, but also strive to find a way to redirect gifts where there is a better fit. Always work for a win-win situation.

Celebrate!

Thank God and others who make ministry possible and fruitful. Many people will not need a tangible reward, but most will want to know that their efforts have made a positive difference, and everyone should be recognized. One of the formative goals in Christian life

is in finding ways that our God-given gifts contribute to the coming of the kingdom in this time and place (another reason for qualitative evaluation)!

Find natural times and places to acknowledge and celebrate the accomplishments (and the attempts) the congregation has made throughout the year. Fifth Sunday fellowship meals, end or beginning of school, close of harvest season, Mother's and Father's Days, and the changes in church season are some of the opportunities to come together in festive ways.

Continue to set new goals that sustain a sense of vitality and purpose as well as point toward a hope-filled future. Guided by God's spirit, your small church/charge can prosper to serve this age and the next.

Resources

- Administration in the Small Membership Church* by John H. Tyson (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), ISBN: 9780687646432.
- Can These Bones Live? Bringing New Life to a Dying Church* by Kevass J. Harding (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), ISBN: 9780687335572.
- Charting a Course for Discipleship* by Teresa Gilbert, Patty Johansen, Jay Regenniter; revised by Delia Halverson (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2012), ISBN: 9780881776164.
- Christian Education in the Small Membership Church* by Karen Tye (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), ISBN: 9780687650996.
- Effective Small Churches in the 21st Century* by Carl Dudley (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), ISBN: 9780687090907.
- Ending with Hope: A Resource for Closing Congregations* by Beth Ann Gaede, editor (Bethesda: The Alban Institute, 2002), ISBN: 9781566992633.
- Evangelism in the Small Membership Church* by Royal Speidel (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), ISBN: 9780687335794.
- Help! I'm a Small Church Youth Worker: Achieving Big-Time Success in a Non-Mega Ministry*, by Rich Grassel (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), ISBN: 9780310239468.
- The Indispensable Guide for Smaller Churches* by David R. Ray (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2009), ISBN: 9780829815078.
- Local Ministry: Story, Process, and Meaning*, edited by Robin Greenwood and Caroline Pascoe (London: SPCK, 2006), ISBN: 139780281057139. (www.spck.org.uk)
- Opening Ourselves to Grace: Basic Christian Practices* (DVD) by Mark V. Purushotham (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2007), ISBN: 9780881775082.
- Pastoral Care in the Small Membership Church* by James L. Killen Jr. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), ISBN: 9780687343263.
- Releasing the Power of the Smaller Church*, edited by Shawn McMullen (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing, 2007), ISBN: 9780784721469.
- Shepherding the Small Church: A Leadership Guide for the Majority of Today's Churches*, 2nd ed., by Glenn C. Daman (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publishing, 2007), ISBN: 9780825425004.
- Small Congregation, Big Potential: Ministry in the Small Membership Church* by Lyle E. Schaller (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), ISBN: 9780687036561.

Spiritual Leadership in the Small Membership Church by David Canada (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), ISBN: 9780687494828.

Where 20 or 30 Are Gathered: Leading Worship in the Small Church by Christine O'Reilly and Peter Bush (Bethesda: The Alban Institute, 2006), ISBN: 9781566993227.

Worshiping in the Small Membership Church by Robin Knowles Wallace (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), ISBN: 9780687651016.

www.umvitalcongregations.com. Articles and helps in congregational vitality.

UMC Agencies & Helpful Links

General Board of Church and Society, www.umc-gbcs.org, 202-488-5600; Service Center, 1-800-967-0880

General Board of Discipleship (d/b/a Discipleship Ministries, www.umcdiscipleship.org, 877-899-2780; Discipleship Resources, <http://bookstore.upperroom.org>, 1-800-972-0433; The Upper Room, www.upperroom.org, 1-800-972-0433; email: info@umcdiscipleship.org

General Board of Global Ministries, www.umcmmission.org, 1-800-862-4246 or 212-870-3600; email: info@umcmmission.org

General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, www.gbhem.org, 615-340-7400

General Board of Pension and Health Benefits, www.gbophb.org, 847-869-4550

General Commission on Archives and History, www.gcah.org, 973-408-3189

General Commission on Religion & Race, www.gcorr.org, 202-547-2271; email: info@gcorr.org

General Commission on the Status & Role of Women, www.gcsrw.org, 1-800-523-8390

General Commission on United Methodist Men, www.gcummm.org, 615-340-7145

General Council on Finance and Administration, www.gcfa.org, 866-367-4232 or 615-329-3393

Office of Civic Youth-Serving Agencies/Scouting (General Commission on United Methodist Men), www.gcummm.org, 615-340-7145

The United Methodist Publishing House, www.umph.org, 615-749-6000; Curric-U-Phone, 1-800-251-8591; Cokesbury, www.cokesbury.com, 1-800-672-1789

United Methodist Communications, www.umcom.org, 615-742-5400; EcuFilm, 1-888-346-3862; InfoServ, email: infoserv@umcom.org; *Interpreter Magazine*, www.interpretermagazine.org, 615-742-5441

United Methodist Women, www.unitedmethodistwomen.org; 212-870-3900

For additional resources, contact your annual conference office.